



VIDEO: Shauna Rolston and her carbon cello



By Trish Crawford
Oct 17, 2011

He's known as Carbon Baby and he's the sturdy delight of cellist Shauna Rolston.

The sleek, black, modern-looking cello is such an integral part of Rolston's performances that composer Douglas Schmidt has recently written a special work for the cellist and her instrument titled *The Devil's Sweat* (a "carbon concerto" for carbon cello and orchestra).

Commissioned by Esprit Orchestra, it will have its premier at their Oct. 19 performance at Koerner Hall at the Royal Conservatory of Music.

"It sounds like a cello," says Rolston, "but there is still a difference."

Lighter and more durable than wooden cellos which are susceptible to moisture and temperatures, it is claimed that Carbon Baby could be dropped from an airplane and suffer no ill effects. (Its inventor Luis Leguia reportedly tied it to the top of his car, took a long drive, and then left it in a field for a week to test it.) However, Rolston's much too fond of her instrument to try anything like that and she buys it a seat on an airplane when she travels.

A child prodigy in Banff, Rolston got her first pint-sized cello at the age of 2 and was performing at 4. When she was 12, she obtained wooden George, "who was born in Paris in 1824," she says.

"I grew up with George, he was fantastic," says Rolston, 44, in her studio at the University of Toronto where she heads the strings department.

Cellist Shauna Rolston and her Carbon Baby perform Oct. 19 at Koerner Hall.
RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

He was her favourite for many years but, in 2002, she commissioned David Wiebe to build her a wooden cello which she calls, David.

Five years ago, she became intrigued by the new carbon-fiber cellos being made by Luis and Clark and dedicated herself to "really, understand the instrument, to understand it as I would a regular cello."

Affordable (by string instrument standards) at around \$7,000, the black cello is impervious to the weather which can wreak havoc on wooden instruments, she says. So she retired George and David to climate-controlled closets and took Carbon Baby on the road.

"I travelled many years with George around the world and the humidity really affected him. It was good for him to have a rest."

While the carbon cello sounds just like a cello should, says Rolston, "it's like the sound is surrounding you. Pianists who accompany me say they can hear it behind me while, with a wooden cello, the sound is more out front."

The only wooden parts of Carbon Baby are the sound posts and the bridge, says Rolston, adding this cello is not better than a wooden one, "just different."

There is a deeper resonance she says, demonstrating with her carbon bow and is slightly smaller than a wooden cello. It is so shiny she can see her reflection on its surface and discovered recently that a light on the cello send a blinding glare in the direction of a member of the audience.

She keeps it clean and shiny with Windex, something that you can't do with wood.

Bringing in a new instrument has helped “keep every aspect of what I do fresh,” she says, adding she is often playing old favourite pieces by Elgar and Beethoven.

However, Schmidt’s composition is very modern, she says, adding this is the third time he has written a composition specifically for her. As the title implies, “It is certainly edgy, not a melodious work.”

Schmidt, interviewed from his home in Germany, became intrigued with writing a piece for the carbon cello after Rolston let him play Carbon Baby.

“I was amazed at how lively the sound is. I hope I beat everyone to be the first to write a concerto for it.”

He’s planning to be at the performance which will be the first time he will have heard the concerto played by an orchestra

In fact, the piece was originally going to be called *Carbon Concerto* but was renamed *Devil’s Sweat* to fit in with the evening’s program theme “Stirred So Much.”

“I feel a lot of edginess on the planet, people are unsettled and feeling unsafe,” says Schmidt. “It’s also about communication. The more devices we have, the more we feel isolated.”

There’s no sense writing a lullaby for Rolston, he pointed out, “Shauna’s got real presence. I wouldn’t like to write a quiet piece for her.”

Or Carbon Baby.

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